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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 001938

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [OTRA](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS: EUR A/S FRIED'S
MEETING WITH ARMENIAN OPINION MAKERS

REF: A) YEREVAN 1790 B) YEREVAN 1764 C) YEREVAN 1749

D) YEREVAN 1692

Classified By: Ambassador John M. Evans for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) Summary: During an October 18 lunch meeting with Armenian government officials, opposition parliamentarians, and academics, A/S Fried heard competing arguments about the package of constitutional amendments (reftels) slated for referendum on November 27. Supporters maintained the amendments, while not perfect, constituted a positive step -- supported by the Armenian public -- toward democratic rule. Detractors asserted that, in the unlikely event a disenfranchised electorate overcomes the high voter threshold to pass the amendments, the current government will exploit loopholes to retain its "authoritarian" rule. Ambassador Evans moderated as participants maintained their scripted positions (reftels) and displayed a hard-headed unwillingness to compromise or approach the process of democratic reform responsibly.

Participants included:

EUR Assistant Secretary Daniel Fried
Ambassador John Evans
Ambassador Steven Mann
DCM Anthony Godfrey
EUR/SNEC Deputy Director Elizabeth Rood
Yerevan Pol/Econ notetaker

Minister of Justice David Harutyunian
National Assembly Deputy Chairman Tigran Torosian
Opposition MP Stepan Zakarian
Opposition MP Artashes Geghamian
Opposition MP Shavarsh Kocharian
Opposition MP Vazgen Manukian
Deputy Foreign Minister Arman Kirakossian
Academy of Public Administration Rector Armen Harutyunyan
Democracy NGO Chair Vardan Poghosian End Summary.

AMENDMENTS "NECESSARY BUT NOT SUFFICIENT" FOR DEMOCRACY

12. (C) During an October 18 lunch meeting with Armenian government officials, opposition parliamentarians, and academics, Minister of Justice David Harutyunian told A/S Fried that his government's package of constitutional amendments, while not perfect, represents a positive step toward -- and a necessary GOAM commitment to -- Armenian democracy. Constitutional amendments co-author and National Assembly Deputy Chairman Tigran Torosian told Fried he believed the amendments would play a "significant role" in establishing "irreversible mechanisms for democracy."

13. (C) Both Harutyunian and Torosian quoted Ambassador Evans -- "constitutional reform is necessary but not sufficient for democracy" -- and claimed the GOAM has the political will to actually implement the reforms. Fried emphasized USG support for free and fair elections in the November 27 referendum as well as the 2007 parliamentary and presidential elections. Harutyunian said the Armenian government "has no intention of interfering" with votes, particularly given past and present scrutiny of elections. The November 27 referendum, Torosian said, will be "free and fair."

OPPOSITION: "NO POLITICAL WILL TO IMPLEMENT REFORMS"

14. (C) Advocating more immediate steps toward democratic reform, opposition National Democratic Union MP Vazgen Manukian told A/S Fried "democracy is not a poison to take in small doses so it won't affect you." The GOAM, Manukian asserted, is "only pretending" to have interest in democratic reform to placate "European institutions" pushing for the measures. Public interest in constitutional reform doesn't exist, Manukian asserted, and adopting a new constitution will only delay meaningful change. Opposition Peoples' Party MP Stephan Zakarian added that flawed elections, restrictions

on press freedoms, and a "lack of political will to implement reforms" are among the factors that contribute to an atmosphere of distrust in an already apathetic electorate. "People just don't believe that a dictator can suddenly become a democrat," Zakarian said.

15. (C) Opposition National Unity leader MP Artashes Geghamyan told Fried he would only support the constitutional amendments -- which Geghamyan admitted were positive -- "if the government commits in advance to early national elections." To understand where this country is going, Geghamyan told Fried, "you have to look at where we've been." Since independence, the government has been unable "to stabilize this country." Geghamyan thanked A/S Fried for the USG's "continued support for democratic reform in Armenia," but asserted that Armenian voters had witnessed little progress and will invest even less trust in "a government that violates the principles of democracy." (Note: Geghamyan asked A/S Fried to encourage President Kocharyan to accept the National Unity Party's call for early elections following the referendum. A/S Fried declined but noted he would emphasize the USG's interest in free and fair elections at a meeting with Kocharyan later in the day. End Note.)

16. (C) Citing a high voter threshold and low public interest, opposition National Assembly Justice Party MP Shavarsh Kocharyan repeated his frequent predictions that the amendments would fail in referendum. Kocharyan told A/S Fried that Armenians have few guarantees that the amendments would bar the president from seeking a third term in office. "If the government really intended to take steps toward democracy, it would take steps to build public trust," according to Kocharyan, who also told Fried that the government has done little to turn around its legacy of fraudulent elections. (Note: Publicly, Shavarsh Kocharyan is an outspoken critic of the regime and the referendum, although he is a co-author of the amendments.)

FRIED: TIME TO ESTABLISH THE RULES OF THE GAME

17. (C) Reinforcing Ambassador Evans' public statements throughout the constitutional amendments debate (reftels), A/S Fried emphasized USG support for free and fair elections and urged participants to make a good-faith effort to first establish the rules, then debate the direction of the democracy. Ambassador Evans reminded participants that the USG will both announce a package of assistance designed to promote free and fair elections in 2007 and 2008, and monitor Armenia's progress on democratic reform as a criterion for Millennium Challenge Grant eligibility.

COMMENT: THE LONG ROAD TO REFERENDUM

18. (C) Throughout the lunch meeting, government and opposition participants repeated their well-known positions on the constitutional amendments and the November 27 referendum (reftels). Participants sparred over accusations that opposing sides were responsible for a meltdown in dialogue, opposition members in particular complaining that the ruling coalition excluded them from the pre-referendum constitutional debate. While a helpful window on the political wrangling leading up to the referendum, the lunch illustrated how members of the Armenian political elite -- both the governing coalition and the opposition -- are still unwilling to compromise and seemingly unable to approach the debate with open minds.

19. (U) EUR/FO has cleared this message.
EVANS